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Throughout, I have tried to view the lives of European traders and their Asian collaborators, insofar as possible, as they themselves saw them instead of looking at them from a purely present-day western standpoint. Much of the mercantile and maritime activity in the Indian and China seas, centuries old before the Europeans were ever heard of, pursued the even tenor of its way throughout the modern period. Similarly, traditional Asian methods of accounting, transferring funds, and granting credit continued side by side with European business procedures. Although European entrepreneurs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, thinking and acting in terms of the theories and practices of their own day, believed—at least, most of them—in the superiority of their religion and civilization, they by no means universally believed in the superiority of their economy. Our view of the West as "rich" and "developed" and of most of Asia as "poor" and "underdeveloped" would have been incomprehensible to them.

For an understanding of their view of Asia, it must always be remembered that the Europeans had not experienced the industrial, "communications," and medical revolutions of the nineteenth century. We can probably appreciate more easily the great changes in transport and in medicine than those which the industrial revolution brought in Europe's relations with Asia. The monsoon winds determined the timing of the voyages; the time-lag of from five to six months in communication with Asia and of at least a year in receiving a reply to a letter caused difficulties. Contemporaries took these conditions for granted, just as they did the omnipresence and capriciousness of death. They recognized that life expectancy in the tropics was somewhat less than in Europe, but, for many of them, either the possible rewards offset the risks, or the life awaiting them east of the Cape was more appealing than the one facing them at home. Many Europeans of humble social origins preferred the blue skies, warm breezes, and other attractions of the tropics to the squalor to which they were condemned in Europe, and many more, plied with drink and dumped aboard an East Indiaman, had no choice in the matter. Assuredly, among Europeans who developed immunity to tropical diseases in Asia there

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European knowledge of Asia, thanks to numerous travel narratives and the development of cartography, was far greater than Asian knowledge of Europe. No one knew what the population of Asia was, but it loomed far larger than that of Europe.[2] Though the Portuguese had proved the superiority of Europe in weapons and in military power on the sea, the great Asian empires—Chinese, Japanese, Ottoman, Persian, and Mughal—commanded European respect. All were widely recognized in 1600 as the seats of great, though non-Christian, civilizations, whose artisans produced goods of a quality that as yet Europeans could not hope to equal. Most Europeans were obsessed with hostility toward Islam, and the idea that allies for the continuance of the crusade against Muslims could be found among non-Muslim Asian peoples had not been entirely given up. The rulers of the Mughal empire in India, founded by Baber, a Muslim invader from central Asia in the 1520s, and consolidated by Akbar fifty years later, did not control all India to the extent that the "Grand Turk" (sultan) at Constantinople, the shah of Persia, and the emperors of China and Japan controlled their respective dominions. The Asian regions where local political authority was weakest, India and the Malay archipelago,[3] were destined to become the seats of European empire.

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